

School experience, failure, and dropout: the students' perspectives

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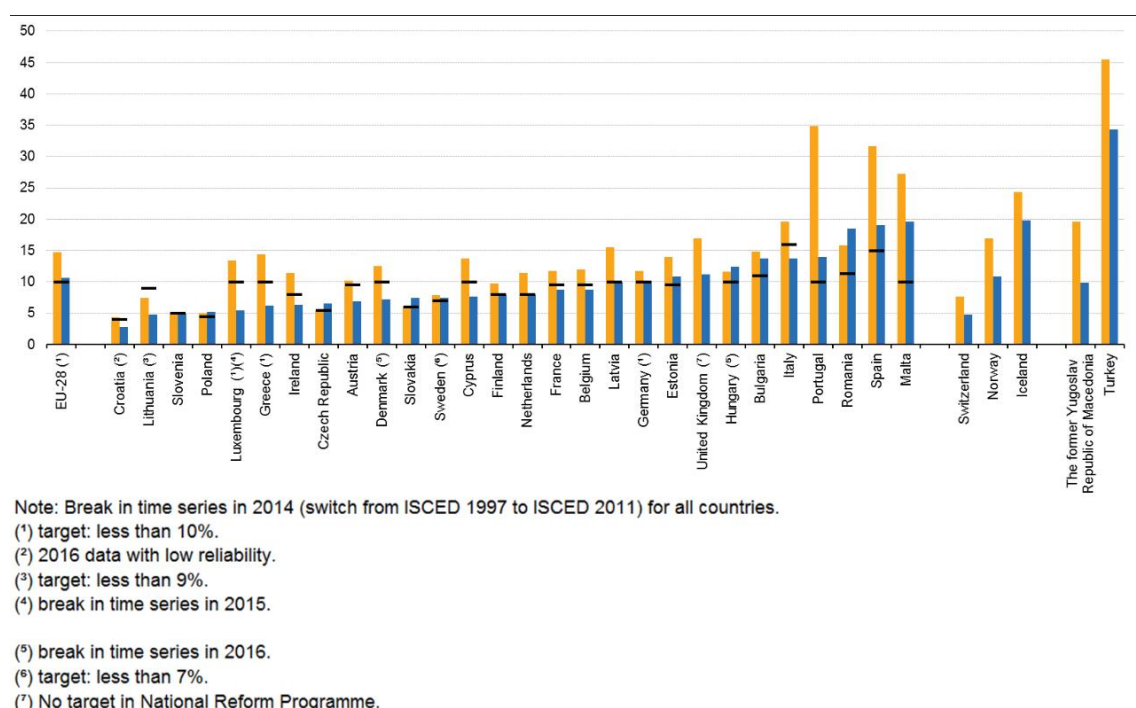
Introduction

In this paper, the authors identify, analyze and discuss schooling factors that (negatively) impact the educational attainment of adolescents and young adults (12-24 year olds) in two national contexts that present close resemblances – Portugal and Spain. The geographical proximity also accounts for the selection of these two countries.

In recent years, school failure and early school leaving have become central concerns within the European Union. Analyzing the factors associated with school failure and dropout and adopting measures to reduce it have been the subject of greater attention of national policies across Europe. National dropout rates under 10% in all the 28 countries are the European Union target for 2020 (10,7% is the average in the European Union).

As we can see in Figure 1, even though early leaving has decreased sharply since 2008, Portugal and Spain still present high levels of early leavers, when compared to the other countries that are part of the European Union (see first 28 countries in the graph).

Figure 1 - Early leavers from education and training in Europe (2008/ 2016)



Source: Eurostat: [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Early_leavers_from_education_and_training_by_country_2008_and_2016.png)

[explained/index.php/File:Early leavers from education and training, by country, 2008 and 2016.png](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Early_leavers_from_education_and_training_by_country_2008_and_2016.png)

In Portugal, even though student learning outcomes, enrolment, and completion rates have been steadily improving in the last 40 years, early school leaving rates are still at 14% (European Commission, 2013; PORDATA, 2016).

In Spain, dropout rates are among the highest (19%) in the European Union, despite the reduction that has occurred in recent years (Serrano et al., 2013). Spain is also one of the countries with the highest level of school failure in the European Union, especially for the school population between 18 and 24 years old (Eurostat, 2016).

The European Union has published several reports with comparative studies of these problems across the various countries. Among the factors that are consistently referred as being associated with a poor school performance and early dropout are: a) the family context; b) the migrant status; c) various personal circumstances; d) gender; e) socioeconomic status; f) factors related to schools and the educational system (Eurydice, 2016).

These reports also stress the argument that the socioeconomic status of the students seems to be the stronger factor influencing school performance and early dropout. The higher is socioeconomic status, the less evident are the differences in dropout rates in relation to other variables such as gender, ethnicity or migrant origin (Eurydice, 2016).

Factors related to schools and the educational systems are also consistently referred as variables that have a relevant influence in student performance and early dropout. Factors of potential risk are: a) retention; b) socioeconomic segregation of schools; c) early routing of students' to non-regular school courses. Reports also refer aspects potentially related to the reducing of dropout risk, namely: a) the frequency of kindergarten; b) quality care in early childhood; c) successful mobility between education cycles (especially between primary and

lower secondary education); d) the existence of more flexible paths in upper secondary education (Eurydice, 2016).

In this paper we specifically address school/schooling factors related to these interconnected phenomena (school failure / school dropout), but assuming them as the result of a long-term process of disengagement influenced by an intersection of various factors and variables that determine the risk, the failure, and ultimately dropping out.

At-risk students, school failure, and dropout

At-risk students can be defined as students that, for several reasons, do not attain the expected educational outcomes. Early school leavers are taken as young people between 18 and 24 that have not completed secondary education or that only possess pre-employment or professional courses that are not equivalent to a secondary graduation certificate (European Union, 2010).

Most international studies, as well as national and European reports, aiming at identifying factors that impact attainment and/or predict school failure and dropout, have been developed through quantitative and/or econometric methodologies that analyze risk factors generally described in two major groups: the status risk factors and the alterable risk factors. Status risk factors include variables such as socioeconomic status, parental education and employment, age, gender, native language, mobility, family structure, among others. Alterable risk factors, more related to school, include variables such as academic failure, grade retention, attendance, misbehavior, and others (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015).

Among the most well-known and discussed factors associated with at-risk students and school dropout are the socioeconomic and cultural status/ academic level of families and material goods (Bernardi & Requena, 2010; Ferrer Esteban, Castel, & Ferrer, 2006; UNESCO, 2017). But there are also factors related to schools and their characteristics (Ferrer Esteban, Castel, & Ferrer, 2006), migrant status and minority social and ethnic groups (Cabrera, 2013; Calero et al., 2007), personal characteristics, expectations and personality (Calero, Choi, & Waisgrais, 2010), and academic achievement (Breen & Jonsson, 2005).

Thus failure and dropout are not inherent to the student him/herself, but the result of the intersection of different categories and variables that determine their risk of occurrence. The studies show us a complex map of variables that function either to include or to exclude students from the schooling system (Hoff, Olson, & Peterson, 2015).

Dropping out of school is not a terminal phenomenon but a complex process that for most of the students starts in primary education and continues with their entry in compulsory secondary education. It's often the result of a disengagement process (Fernández Enguita, 2011) that is curricular, affective, relational, and cognitive. It is not an individual issue, but the effect of intersectionality (Collins, 1990), that is, the effect of the interaction among factors that determine inequality, discrimination, or exclusion (or 'privilege') within the school context.

While quantitative analyses reveal the importance of the problem of exclusion and the impact of several variables, they do not tell us anything about 'failing' students themselves (see Gamoran, 2001; O'Connor, 2001; Smyth & Hattam, 2004; Mena Martínez, Fernández Enguita, & Riviére Gómez, 2010). In this complex map, the

experience of the students is very important but seldom looked at (Mena Martínez, Fernández Enguita, & Riviére Gómez, 2010). To have a more comprehensive view of the phenomena, we need to adopt the 'failing' individual's point of view, the perspective of those who, by a plethora of factors, among which schooling, find themselves 'without a system'.

School/schooling factors matters because early identification is possible, school climate can make a difference, and early intervention can be well succeeded (Dietrichson, Bog, Filges, & Jorgensen, 2017; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Kane et al., 2016).

School/schooling factors

The relationship between school experience and the decision to drop out has been a focus of attention in recent years. Grade retention is related with future dropout (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani 2001). For example, repeating a grade from kindergarten to 6th grade can be associated with an increasing ratio of dropping out, even after controlling differences related to socioeconomic and cultural status. Students who end the 6th grade overage for grade can experience a substantial disengagement during the middle school, which can lead to a decline of attendance and, ultimately, to dropping out of school (Rodrick, 1994). This is often referred as one of the leading reasons that make students dropout of school.

In addition, school characteristics and climate increase (or not) the chances of students dropping out. In a study that aimed at understanding the characteristics and the climate of both schools with low dropout rates and schools with high

dropout rates, Christle, Jolivette and Nelson (2007) found that “teacher behaviors and characteristics have a great deal of influence on students outcomes” (p. 333). Greater teacher supervision and interaction with students are common in educational contexts with low dropout rates. On the other hand, in educational contexts with high dropout rates instructional/ academic methodologies are more common among teachers, and student engagement is lower. The main conclusion is that student interactions with teachers and staff, as well as school, and classroom climate can make a difference.

The quality of the relations between students and teachers was also found to be of importance when it comes to dropping out of school by Lee and Burkan (2003), along with issues such as school size and school curriculum. In smaller schools, with fewer students, they are more likely to stay in school and don't dropout. Students are less likely to dropout in schools that offer mainly academic courses and few non-academic courses. Finally, and most important in this study, students are less likely to dropout of school in education contexts where relationships between teachers and students are positive.

Connected to this factor, of teacher-student relationships, we also find a relationship between the implementation of positive school interventions and support for students, and school dropout rates. A large study carried out across 37 states in the US (Freeman et al., 2015) revealed that high school wide positive interventions and support for students had significant implication on attendance. In its turn, the attendance revealed to be a significant indicator of high school dropout risk. So, positive interventions and support for students in the school context are quite important to prevent dropout. In school contexts where this

interventions and support for students were consistently implemented for longer periods of time, substantial reduction of dropout rates occurred.

When the school path is characterized by learning difficulties, low academic achievement, grade retention (and consequently, negative attitudes towards school), early school leaving is more likely to occur (Simões et al., 2008). Therefore, grade retention, school climate, student engagement, and school transitions are pointed as key schooling factors to understand and prevent student dropout (Hoff, Olson, & Peterson, 2015).

While socioeconomic and cultural status is a major predictor of educational achievement and an important factor to understand school failure and dropout, schools and teachers can play an important role in overcoming a disadvantaged background. It is possible for schools and local stakeholders to substantially improve the educational achievement of students of low socioeconomic and cultural status, prevent retention, and thus reducing dropping out rates (Dietrichson et al., 2017). Providing a quality school experience for all requires educational environments in which students' feel safe, culturally recognized, respected, and have a sense of belonging from the very beginning of their school life (Hoff, Olson, & Peterson, 2015). However, most of the time school administrators and teachers maintain low expectations towards students with a history of retention, from low socioeconomic status, with migrant status; in addition, the relation with their families is usually poor because school professionals perceive these families as unreliable (Patacho, 2015).

Standard compensation measures provided by the system seldom succeed in reconnecting these students with school work because they don't feel represented

and valued in the subjects and materials they work with (Torres Santomé, 2011). For culturally subordinated and working class groups, the school culture often constitutes a process of oppression and symbolic violence that leads to academic failure because they don't feel represented in the curriculum (Giroux, 1992). Also, the dominant discourse of the neoliberal agenda, of 'blaming the families', still prevails, which does not do any good in restoring the schools' credibility among these students and their families, thus perpetuating inequality (Kainz & Aikens, 2007; Silva & Stoer, 2005; Patacho, 2015).

Too many times students internalize the 'blame' discourse, self-attributing the causes for their academic failure. The strategies implemented by their schools for managing difference fail with these students, paradoxically accentuating their exclusion (cf. Popkewitz, 2008).

Meanwhile, teachers can make the difference. Invested with a daily power that they do not always perceive, they may unconsciously hinder the lives of the students they work with or may consciously develop their full potential (Jardine, 2007).

Method

This paper is part of a larger study carried out both in Portugal and Spain aimed to identify, analyze, and understand which elements and factors are involved when a student finds himself or herself in an at-risk situation or leaves school before completing compulsory secondary education.

As our aim was to understand these interconnected phenomena (school failure and dropout) from the students' experience, the meanings attributed to it, its significance, doubts, and life itself, a qualitative approach was best suited to deeply analyze the educational, family, and sociocultural contexts that constitute students' biographical and experiential networks.

As methodological strategies we used in-depth ethnographic interviews (89), followed by selected biographical case studies (8), and focus group interviews (8) in both contexts, with two groups of participants (students at-risk and early school leavers) of three age groups: 12-16, 16-18, and 18-24 years old.

In this paper we focus on the data collected with the initial ethnographic interviews. They allowed getting information about the opinions, ideas and events that have happened in a singular socio-educational environment from our participant' point of view.

Interviews focused on the family and school context, the socio-cultural context, and also on the vision of the subject on him/herself, highlighting participants' perceptions and experiences on the following themes: the school context, the family context, the neighborhood context, work experiences, leisure and friendships, and identity traits.

For this paper we take into account the theme *school/schooling* to discuss school failure and dropout from the students' perspectives. Data was analyzed using a combination of content analysis and critical discourse analysis procedures (Gibbs, 2012; Titscher et al., 2000).

Results

Looking at the participants discourse about their school life, their experiences and trajectories, we found several factors related to the theme school/schooling deeply connected with participants' history of failure and dropout. The participants' perspectives can be condensed in 4 major ideas: 1) History of grade retention in primary school; 2) Disconnection between school and students' internal world, interests, and experiences; 3) Internalization of the "blame discourse", self-attributing the causes of academic failure; 4) The role of teachers and teaching methodologies.

History of grade retention in primary school

As suggested by the literature, there is a strong relation between grade retention, school failure and dropout (Carabaña, 2011, 2013, 2015; Monarca, Rappoport, & Fernández González, 2012). The life of most participants is marked with 1 to 3 retentions until they get the 6th grade. Grade retention continues over high school, until eventually students decide to drop out.

It is quite obvious that for at-risk students and school leavers the process of disengagement starts in the very beginning of their school life. Retention is part of this process. Some students reveal a strong sense of frustration with the experience of grade retention, because they don't really want to be held back.

- I was retained twice (...) I tried to follow [in the third grade], but did not succeed and the same happened in the fourth grade, then I gave up, did not study (18, Male, 2R, SP)

Disconnection between school and students' internal world, interests, and experiences

Participants point out that they did not like the schoolwork, the lessons, and, in general, the tasks they had to do at school. They liked the breaks; playing with their friends, hang out with them, but not the classes and the work teachers ask them to do. Some say that they still try to study, but they felt unmotivated, bored.

- I do not know, I did not like it [school]. I was having that time, like being bored, I did not want to do anything (14, Male, 1R, PT)
- I feel good here [at school], but I do not like being here. Only on breaks (15, Female, 3R, PT)
- At school I was bored to death, I did not like anything, wasn't committed to anything (18, Male, 2R, SP)
- I did not like [high school]... at middle school I played with barbies [doll]. In high school everything was different and I was bored (17, Female, 2R, SP)

From the very beginning of their school lives these students feel the school lessons to be a strange culture, as something disconnected from their interests, their experiences, and their world. Since very early they feel unmotivated, and over the time they end up by hating school.

Internalization of the "blame discourse", self-attributing the causes of academic failure

Students perceive the school, the curriculum and the structure of the classes (often highly directive), as something they have difficulty to deal with and fit in. As school is like it is, if they have bad results, if they fail, it is because it is their fault, because

they do not try hard enough, because they do not study, as they should, because they are not capable, or they are not good enough. They are the main problem, not school.

- I did not try hard enough [in middle school] (15, Female, 3R, PT)
- It was all play for me [in middle school]. I did not take anything seriously. I just played in classes, did not care (14, Male, 1R, PT)
- I do not have an ability to study (17, Female, 2R, SP)
- I believe it was my fault... I did it to myself... because I did not know how to do things the way it should be (20, Male, 1R, SP)

Despite they feel terribly bored and unmotivated, at no point they question the school curriculum they have to deal with, the way lessons are organized, the curriculum materials with which they work, the whole organization and the functioning of the classes. So they internalize a deep sense of guilt over failure and even dropping out of school.

- I have a lot to be blamed for, because at that time when teachers tried to help I rejected it (18, Male, 2R, SP)

Put it in another way, these students don't look at themselves as excluded by the school system. In contrary, they self-attribute the causes of academic failure and drop out, causes that they internalize as personal behaviors towards school.

The role of teachers and teaching methodologies

Regarding teachers and teaching methodologies, there are two main ideas that are frequent in the perceptions of students who experienced failure at school and who

eventually dropped out. One is the constant reference to a very directive instruction and highly academic teaching methodologies. The other is what we may call a fragile relation between teachers and students.

- I had a Maths teacher that I did not like at all! This teacher picked on anything, like, everyone was quiet and she started to shout out of the blue. True! (14, Male, 1R, PT)
- “But what is wrong with you? I am your student!”. “No, you are not my student, you are nothing” [laughter], “you are from the streets”, the English teacher used to say. So I said “am I from the street? So now you will remember me, as the street girl” (17, Female, 2R, SP)

Students remember that their teachers’ methodology was basically speaking to them. They spoke, and spoke all over the time. In their classes, directive strategies were dominant. They could ask questions about the subjects, but often they did not understand the explanations and the teacher soon passed to another subject. The same happened with exercises. It seems to them that teachers only wanted to know about students that already understand the subjects. They did not focus much on the students who had difficulty in understanding what they said or the exercises they proposed and paid little attention to them.

- Because the teachers would explain for those who would understand, and then you would ask them and they said “ask your colleague” or “find it out”, “read the book”... and I would not [understand] (17, Female, 2R, SP)
- I wouldn’t [understand when the teacher lectured]. Sometimes I did. But then he moved on to a different content and then I was confused... I did not remember the previous one any more (15, Female, 3R, PT)

The role of teachers stands out very clearly in students' perspectives on school aspects related to their failure and dropout history. They generally feel that teachers don't care about them. They don't feel enough support and attention from their teachers. This is a very strong idea across students. Most of them feel that

their teachers where not committed, that they don't really try to help, don't create opportunities, and don't believe in their potential to do things.

- The teachers believe that I am good for nothing (15, Male, 2R, SP)
- They [the teachers] sent me to the back of the classroom, and I said "I am going to sleep, as I do nothing, I can go to sleep" (17, Female, 2R, SP)
- These teachers did not care much (15, Female, 3R, PT)
- There were other [teachers] that did not treat me the same way as they would other students (18, Male, 2R, SP)

Some students found themselves placed at the back of the classroom, receiving little attention from their teachers. Additionally, some of them felt stigmatized as if they can't do anything good. They usually felt that teachers don't treat them like other students; they felt devalued.

Some participants point out that this stigmatization of students with poor results and difficulties is so strong that even when these students begin to show some improvement, the dominant tendency is to continue to penalize them in their evaluation.

- At high school I started to improve, but I had a problem with a teacher who knew I had failed English, but then I started to get good marks [...] when I looked at the correction and told her "this is right, this is wrong", she would say "Oh, it's true, I forgot" and raised my mark (18, Male, 2R, SP)

There are also some reports of aggressions between teachers and students. The feeling of frustration of some students is so strong that it eventually causes tension in their relationship with teachers, even leading to situations of physical aggression.

- I even struck a teacher when I was in primary school [...] I think it was because she upset me! I no longer remember why! (14, Male, 1R, PT)

These aspects related to the relationship between teachers and students are particularly important, since teachers continue to play a central role in structuring the pedagogical relationship in the classroom and are the ones that can make a difference in the lives of their students with greater difficulties, so they can overcome them.

Conclusion

School and schooling factors play a role in school failure and dropout. The school system includes and excludes students as they fit or don't fit in the schooling standardized organization and culture. This is a larger process that comprises several interconnected aspects.

Grade retention is not the first sign of student disengagement, but it's the first school response to the students who cause problems to school because they don't fit in what is expected from them. In fact, most of our participants had a history of grade retentions since the very beginning of their school life. Therefore, like pointed out by the literature, for these students school failure and dropping out are also related with grade retention (cf. Alexander, 2001; Hoff, Olson, & Peterson, 2015; Rodrick, 1994; Simões et al., 2008).

However, as a school response, grade retention is part of that schooling standardized culture in which some students have difficulty to fit in. Highly directive methodologies and a poor relation between teachers and students

configure a school and classroom climate that negatively impact students' attendance and results (Hoff et al., 2016).

The main problem for them is that they never felt engaged with schoolwork because they never felt culturally recognized or adequately supported. In fact, they have been suffering throughout their entire school life with a profound disconnection between school/schoolwork and their interests, their internal world, and experiences.

This entire subordination to the dominant standardized school culture is so strong that at-risk students and early school leavers internalize this 'blame discourse', self-attributing the causes of academic failure. Despite criticizing the school in many ways, as well as the teachers, they never actually blame the school structure or its inability to recognize the difficulties of the students and deal with them properly. On the contrary, they individually take responsibility for their course of action. This is a very example of how the school system operates in the construction a new neoliberal common sense (Torres Santomé, 2017).

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